Trump Peace Plan:
A Good Diagnosis but Bad Medication

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Since the time it was unveiled in the White House on January 28, 2020, *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*[1] or more commonly known as Trump Plan, is a non-starter. As it was being announced, two main protagonists—President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—were fighting for their political survival. The US Senate was deliberating the House Resolution to impeach President Trump and moments before the White House event, Israel's Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit formally filed charges of corruption against Netanyahu in a court in Jerusalem. However, both leaders managed to weather the political storm; if the Senate acquitted the US President, the inconclusive March 2, 2020 Knesset elections—the third within a year—injected fresh hopes for the Likud leader. However, even the little hopes people had about the Plan were firmly buried in the pandemic coronavirus and the unfolding worldwide health emergency, mounting human casualties and the impending global economic collapse.

Under such a circumstance, is the Trump Plan still relevant? Or what portions of the Plan would be useful if and when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict takes the central stage of the Middle East?

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The Context

The historic Rabin-Arafat-Clinton handshake on the White House Lawns on September 13, 1993 gave hopes for an Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation and an honourable settlement of the century-old conflict. That was not to be. The outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada or the Al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000 largely buried the peace process. The last meaningful negotiations happened when President Bill Clinton brought Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Chairperson Yasser Arafat for the Camp David talks in the summer of that year. The cycle of violence, intra-Palestinian conflict, and hardening of Israel's positions diminished the chances of a negotiated solution. Moreover, since June 2007, the Palestinians were torn between the West Bank controlled by Fatah-led and internationally recognised Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the Gaza Strip controlled by Hamas. If these were insufficient, the Arab Spring protests, which began in December 2010, added a new dimension; the Arab world is more preoccupied with regime survival and the territorial integrity of the Westphalian state structure than the political rights of the Palestinians and their statelessness.

These, in turn, meant a lesser American desire for the revival of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Then came President Donald Trump. Driven by his inward-looking worldview and with limited interest or experience in foreign affairs, President Trump was not enthusiastic about the peace process. At the same time, he could not ignore the growing international concerns over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The economic component of his Plan was unveiled in Manama on June 22, 2019 and the political part in January 2020. The US team led by President Trump's son-in-law Jerad Kushner actively engaged with Israeli leaders and officials. Still, it had no corresponding engagements with the Palestinians, the party whose welfare and progress the Trump Plan sought to champion.

Though hailed by some as the "Deal of the Century," the Plan had a unique distinction of being rejected by everyone except Prime Minister Netanyahu and his supporters in Israel, and the US. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called it "Slap of the century"[2] While the 22-member Arab League observed that the Plan would not lead to Israeli-Palestinian peace.[3] The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, closely identified with the West, expressed its opposition despite being given a prominent place in the Plan. If Bahrain, which hosted the economic summit, made friendly noises, the Islamic Republic of Iran called it "treason of the century."[4] Turkey derided it as "absolutely unacceptable,"[5] and the European Union accused the US of breaking all international norms and principles in presenting a blatantly pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian proposal.[6]

In short, the Trump Plan was a non-starter from the very beginning, and it trampled all hopes of an honourable political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Indeed, it was dead on arrival.

Yet, the Plan is noteworthy for some of the political observations which are rare in diplomatic proposals. Indeed, some of its diagnosis is accurate, but it was unable to offer a more acceptable offer.

Undiplomatic Bluntness

The Trump Plan recognises that Israel and Palestinians have "suffered greatly from their long-standing and seemingly intractable conflict … (and despite the passage of time and innumerable efforts) many of the disputed issues have remained largely the same." It admits that the prolonged Palestinian aspirations for "self-determination, improvement in their standard of living, social betterment, and a respected place in the region, as well as among the nations of the world," have "not been realized." Indirectly admitting the centrality of the Palestine question for peace in the Middle East, the Plan declares that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "has kept other Arab countries from normalizing their relations" with Israel. But reversing the traditional approach, it observes that the "absence of

formal relations between Israel and most Muslim and Arab countries has only exacerbated the conflict between Israeli and Palestinians." Hence, it suggests that the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Muslim world would further "a just and fair resolution" of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Plan observed that since 1946 "close to 700 UN General Assembly resolutions and over 100 United Nations Security Council resolutions" have been adopted on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Some of them were "inconsistent," and some were "time-bound." These, including UNSC Resolution 242, over which scholars and countries "have differed on their meaning and legal effect" were unable to resolve the conflict. Likewise, scores of "intelligent and dedicated people have devoted lifetime in search of the 'ultimate deal,'" which "has been elusive." Taking cognisance of the present realities, the Plan observes that while "no plan will give either side all of what it wants" it proposes to offer the Palestinians "who do not yet have a state, with a path to a dignified life, respect, security and economic opportunity" even while safeguarding Israel's security.

Two, the Trump Plan offers a "realistic" two-state solution as the endgame. The Trump Plan highlights the prolonged absence of a Palestinian state and pledges "path to a dignified national life, respect, security, and economic opportunity" while ensuring Israel's security. In such a state, the Palestinians will have "all the power to govern themselves but not the power to threaten Israel." The US also recognises emphatically that the Palestinians "deserve a better future." If satisfactory steps are in place, "the United States will support the establishment of a Palestinian State."

The Trump Plan also recognises the Palestinian refugees "have been treated as pawns on the broader Middle East chessboard," and a "just, fair and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee issue is necessary to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." The Trump Plan was even blunter and did not spare its Arab allies. It flagged that after the liberation of

the Emirate in February 1991, Kuwait "began a systematic clearing of Palestinians from the country through violence and economic pressures. The population of Palestinians in Kuwait dropped from 400,000 before the invasion to about 25,000." Most scholars tend to sidestep this issue, which highlights the intra-regional tensions over the Palestine question. Brushing aside political correctness and diplomatic niceties, the Plan mentions the treatment of Palestinians by Arab countries. Praising Jordan for its absorption of the Palestinian refugees, it observes that "in Lebanon, Palestinians have been discriminated against and prevented from entering the labour market for decades, even those born in Lebanon. They are, for the most part, barred from owning property or entering desirable occupations, including law, medicine, and engineering. To gain employment, Palestinians are required to receive government-issued work permits, but remarkably few are ever given to Palestinian refugees." Such candid observations usually are absent in scholarly works, which mainly focus on the Israeli treatment and mistreatment of the Palestinian refugees.

Three, the failure and collapse of the Oslo process raised doubts among the Israelis, Palestinians, and the wider international community over the feasibility of the two-state solution. The trust deficit among the principals, growing violence, civilian deaths, and hardening of the Israeli positions resulted in some even proposing the one-state solution whereby the Israelis and Palestinians could live under one democratic political set-up.[7] Though appealing, this is a euphemism for the destruction of the State of Israel, and the Jewish homeland project and hence is not viable or realistic. Partly due to growing violence and lack of trust, Prime Minister Netanyahu has also been moving away from the two-state solution even though international consensus favours coexistence. Hence, the Trump Plan reiterating the two-state solution is important.

Four, the Plan devotes considerable attention to the links between Jerusalem and the three Abrahamic faiths and goes to great lengths to

mention a host of historical events traced to or associated with the city. In recent years, there are systematic efforts by some Islamic countries to undermine and even deny the Jewish association with Jerusalem. Under their diplomatic pressures, the UNESCO adopted resolutions that recognised only the Christian and Islamic associations with the city and not its Jewish links.[8]

Likewise, in cognisance of the Islamic importance, the Plan refers to Quranic references to Jerusalem, the city being the first Qibla (or direction of prayers) and observes that the "Umayyad Caliphate (756-1031), based in Damascus, offered Jerusalem as an alternative place of pilgrimage when Mecca was controlled by a rival caliphate." It also lists at least 32 specific sites that are holy to all the three faiths. Making veiled criticism of the situation before the June War when Israel captured the old city, the Plan recognises Israel's track record in "safeguarding the religious sites" of East Jerusalem. It proposes that the status quo or Israeli control and administration should continue, and all holy sites "should remain open and available for peaceful worshippers and tourists of all faith." Regarding prayers on Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, it observes that "people of every faith" must be allowed to pray "in a manner that is fully respectful to their religion." Though the Plan exhibits a pro-Israel bias, it recognises and praises Israel's track-record since 1967.

Five, the "prosperity" component of the Trump Plan is rather interesting as it devotes considerable attention and detail to the economic package. In its view, once "the necessary conditions for investment" are created, the Palestinian GDP "could double in 10 years, create over 1 million jobs, reduce unemployment rate below 10 percent, and reduce the poverty rate by 50 percent." It even seeks to transform the Palestinian territories into thriving "business-friendly countries like South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan" and projects the potential regional investments to the tune of over US$ 50 billion spread over ten years. These goals are rather ambitious and, if achieved, would considerably

transform the daily lives of the impoverished Palestinians in the occupied territories.

Six, despite ruling out an Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 border, the Plan recognises that the proposed Palestinian state would encompass "territory reasonably comparable in size in the territory of West Bank and Gaza pre-1967." This would be accomplished through a territorial swap, first outlined in Clinton Parameters in January 2001.[9] Besides parcels on the Israel territories adjacent to the Gaza Strip and along the Israeli-Egyptian border, it identifies the Arab triangle within Israel as a possible area for a swap. To support its position, the Plan has a map identifying the possible areas of the territorial composition of the Palestinian state (Map 1). It is emphatic that there would not be any "forced population transfers" of Arabs or Jews. Above all, the territorial division and separation between the West Bank and Gaza Strip remained a challenge for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiators since the Oslo days. The Trump Plan offers an imaginative underground "transportation corridor directly connecting the West Bank and the Gaza Strip through a major road, and potentially, a modern railway."

Despite these remarkable features, why does the Trump Plan invoke unanimous rejection, condemnation, and disapproval? The answer is obvious; it is highly partisan, skewed, controversial, and hence unrealistic.

Wrong Medication

The Plan evolved over a year with limited, if any, Arab-Palestinian inputs. Its demands on Israel were minimal. While admitting Palestinian stateless and prolonged suffering, it is unable or unwilling to recognise the core issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely, *occupation*. It depicts the possible Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories as "a significant concession" because, upon these territories, "Israel has asserted valid legal and historical claims, and which are part of the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people." This goes against the international

consensus since the early 1970s, which recognises the inalienable political rights of the Palestinians, including their right to statehood. Both the tone and tenor of the Trump Plan is condescending and not respectful of the Palestinians and their rights and claims.

Two, the Plan makes a clear distinction between the PNA-ruled West Bank and Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. Reiterating the traditional American position that Hamas is "a terrorist organization," it holds "Hamas's terror and misrule" responsible for the "massive unemployment, widespread poverty, drastic shortage of electricity and potable water, and other problems" facing the residents of the Gaza Strip. Hence, the Plan expects that the government of an independent Palestinian state "will not include any member of Hamas" or any militant groups unless they explicitly recognise Israel, abandon terror, and commit to nonviolence and other agreements and obligations.

Three, on some of the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Trump Plan moves away from the international norms and consensus. It adopts controversial positions that were in line with the policies pursued by President Trump since he assumed office in 2017. In line with his November 2019 position that Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are "illegal," the Trump Plan observes that Israel "will not have to uproot any settlements, and will incorporate the vast majority of Israeli settlements into contiguous Israeli territory. Israeli enclaves located inside contiguous Palestinian territory will become part of the State of Israel and be connected to it through an effective transportation system." It categorically rules out any Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories. In its view, "Israel and the United States do not believe the State of Israel is legally bound to provide the Palestinians with 100 percent of the pre-1967 territory." If this is not sufficient, the Plan further adds that the "Jordan Valley (which is part of the West Bank that Israel captured from Jordan in the June War of 1967) will be under Israeli sovereignty." Even though

Netanyahu has been making such a suggestion, the Trump Plan gives a green signal to Israel for the annexation of the fertile part of the West Bank.

Four, while recognising the holiness of Jerusalem "to multiple faiths" and the need to keep it "always … open to worshippers of all religions" the Plan declared that in line with the December 6, 2017 decision of President Trump, "Jerusalem will remain the sovereign capital of the soil and it should remain an undivided city." It further urges the international recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Firmly rejecting the Palestinian claims to the city, the Plan proposes that the Palestinian capital "should be in the section of East Jerusalem located in all areas east and north of the existing security barrier (that Israel has built, in violation of the Geneva Convention on occupied territories) … and could be named Al Quds or another name."

Five, the Palestinian demand for a sovereign state has enjoyed wider international support and endorsement. The Plan visualised not a territorially-constrained and scattered entity but also with limited sovereign powers. Citing security considerations, it suggests that under a peace agreement with the Palestinian state, Israel "must have operational control over the airspace West of the Jordan River," that is, over the entire West Bank part of the Palestinian state. Likewise, Israel "will retain sovereignty over territorial waters" of the Gaza Strip.

Six, the military is one of the visible symbols of sovereignty and taking the development logic, it felt that the Palestinians should not be burdened with maintaining an independent army. According to the Plan, the Palestinian state "will not be burdened with such costs, because it will be shouldered by the State of Israel." The funds that "would otherwise be spent on defence can instead be directed towards healthcare, education, infrastructure, and other matters to improve Palestinians' well-being." Once a Peace Agreement is signed, "Israel will maintain overriding security responsibility for the State of Palestine." In other words, when

it comes to security issues, the Palestinian state would be nothing more than another district of Israel.

Seven, the Plan challenges and overturns the traditional international position on the question of Palestinian refugees. On December 11, 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 194 that endorsed the right of the "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest possible date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return."[10] Though the expression "Palestinian refugees" did not appear, from the beginning, the resolution was read, interpreted, and anchored as the basis for Palestinian right to return.[11] While there were disagreements over the number of Palestinian refugees since President Harry S. Truman, all American administrations saw it as a reminder of the Palestinian refugees. Many American presidents unsuccessfully tried to get Israel to accept a significant number of Palestinian refugees within the context of family unions. The failure of the Camp David talks in 2000 was partly due to an unbridgeable gulf between Israeli and Palestinian positions regarding refugees.

In an unusual move, the Trump Plan flags the issue of Jews who left their homes in Arab countries and emigrated to the newly found State of Israel after 1948. Since the 1950s, Israel had suggested that there was a de facto population exchange between Arabs who fled Mandatory Palestine and Jews who fled Arab countries. This line of argument resurfaced during the Oslo accords—both to reduce Israel's role in the refugee problem and to reduce the number of Palestinians it would have to absorb within a peace settlement. The Trump Plan adopts the Israeli position and observes: "Nearly the same number of Jews and Arabs were displaced by the Arab/Israeli conflict." While Israel absorbed Jewish refugees from Arab countries, the Palestinian refugees "who were displaced have, in very significant numbers, been isolated and kept from living as citizens in the many Arab countries of the region." In its view, the

issue of Palestinian refugees could not be resolved without considering the Jewish refugees, "including compensation for lost assets, must also be addressed. Additionally, the State of Israel deserves compensation for the costs of absorbing Jewish refugees from those countries. A just, fair and realistic solution for the issues relating to Jewish refugees must be implemented through an appropriate international mechanism separate from the Israel-Palestinian Peace Agreement."

It means that Israel will not absorb Palestinian refugees; Jews refugees also need to be compensated; and any financial package would be an international arrangement. According to Trump Plan, "There shall be no right of return by, or absorption of, any Palestinian refugee into the State of Israel." By absolving Israel of any role in resolving the problem, the Trump Administration once again went against international law and consensus on the refugee question.

The refugee problem has another dimension. Towards mitigating their problem, an agency—United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)—was established in December 1949 to deal with the refugees of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War exclusively. This meant that the Palestinian refugees are not the mandate of the other refugee agency, namely, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees established in December 1950. From the beginning, a large portion of the funds for the UNRWA has come from the US. As the Trump Plan admits, between 1950 and 2017, Washington contributed about US$ 6.15 billion to UNRWA, and in the last decade, it "contributed US$ 2.99 billion (US$ 3.16 billion in 2017 terms), which accounted for 28 percent of all contributions to UNRWA." For quite some time, the UNRWA has been criticised for its role in "perpetuating" and not resolving the problem.[12] Accusing the agency of being "irredeemably flawed," on September 1, 2018, the US ended its funding to the UNRWA.[13]

Israel would not absorb the Palestinian refugees, and the US would not fund the UNRWA to offer even minimal sustenance to

the refugee population. Then, how to solve the Palestinian refugee problem? According to the Trump Plan the solution lies in the Jordanian model. After the 1948 War, when the Hashemite Kingdom annexed the West Bank, it granted full citizenship to all the Palestinian refugees and residents of the area. Likewise, the Trump Plan wants the host countries to absorb the Palestinian refugees residing in their territories, and this is more valid for Lebanon and Syria, which have a large Palestinian refugee population. As of January 1, 2019, there were 475,075 registered refugees in Lebanon,[14] while Syria had 552,000 registered refugees living in nine camps.[15]

However, a vast majority of the Palestinian refugees are scattered in different parts of the Middle East and beyond, and the Trump Plan offers a three-pronged solution for their resettlement; their absorption by the future Palestinian state; possible absorption by host countries; and members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation accepting 5,000 refugees each year, for up to ten years (50,000 total refugees) subject to their consent. For its part, the US would work "with other countries to establish a framework for the implementation" of the resettlement plan. Far from seeking a "just and lasting" solution to the refugee problem as visualised by UNSC Resolution 242 in November 1967, the Trump Plan transfers the responsibility to others and categorically asks the Palestinians to give up their right to return to their homes.

Eight, the Plan limits Palestinian sovereign functions in the realm of foreign relations. According to the Trump Plan, the future Palestinian state "will not have the right to forge military, intelligence or security agreements with any state or organization that adversely affects the State of Israel's security, as determined by the State of Israel." It further demands that the Palestinian state "will not be able to develop military or paramilitary capabilities inside or outside of the State of Palestine." While the Palestinian state "will be able to establish diplomatic relations with other countries," its admission into international organisations would

be subject to the Israeli veto. In its view, the Palestinian state "may not join any international organization if such membership would contradict commitments of the State of Palestine to demilitarization and cessation of political and judicial warfare against the State of Israel." This is partly in response to several UN and other international organisations accepting the State of Palestine as a member. Palestine became a full member of the International Olympic Committee (1995); International Federation of Association Football, FIFA (1998); UNESCO (2011); and Interpol (2017); and its applications in several other bodies such as World Health Organisation (WHO) and World Trade Organisation (WTO) are pending. Since Palestinian membership often results in these international bodies adopting positions and resolutions highly critical of Israel, the Plan sought to prevent such possibilities by preventing Palestinian membership in international bodies.

Nine, since the 1950s, the US has been active in limiting and even ending the Arab economic boycott of Israel.[16] The early 1990s witnessed considerable dilution of the secondary and tertiary Arab boycott. Still, the demise of the Oslo process led to new grass-roots-based activism against Israel in the form of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.[17] Based primarily in European Union countries, it seeks to end all economic, political, and academic contacts and engagements with Israel and its citizens.

The growing reach of the BDS movement has resulted in Israel increasing its countermeasures through domestic legislations and political campaigns in the US and other countries. The Trump Plan joined the anti-BDS campaign and observed that the Palestinian state "should cease to support anti-Israel initiatives at the United Nations and in other multilateral bodies … should not lend their support to any efforts intended to delegitimize the State of Israel." The US views "the BDS movement as destructive towards peace, and will oppose any activity that advances BDS or other restrictive trade practices targeting Israel," and

demands that the Palestinian state should oppose the BDS movement "and any other effort to boycott" Israel.

Ten, the most positive aspect of the Trump Plan is its economic component. It proposes a slew of infrastructure projects, developmental activities, and investments to the tune of over US$ 50 billion. But the mute question is, who would fund it? The Arab world is struggling with the economic cost of the Arab Spring amidst falling oil prices, the prime source of revenue for the wealthy Gulf Arab countries. Despite their stated goals, countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait have been struggling to move away from their oil-dependent economy. In proposing a grand economic framework, the Trump Administration is not prepared to shoulder the financial burden. Both during the campaign and since assuming office, President Trump has been riding on the popular American revulsion against overseas financial investments and demanding friends and allies to do more. The approach of the Trump Administration on a host of issues such as military engagements (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria), economic commitments to the EU, and tax regimes vis-à-vis China underscore the principle of burden-sharing. Hence, despite not consulting allies and other players while it was being prepared, the Trump Plan's economic agenda rests on international financial contribution and participation. Given their overall reservations, Arab or European countries are unlikely to contribute financially to make the Trump Plan work.

The bleak future of the President's Plan was before the onset of the Coronavirus. While the problem began in late 2019, its reach outside China was felt from mid-January, around the time the Trump Plan was unveiled. As Thomas L. Friedman put it brilliantly, *Our new historical divide: BC and AC—the World Before Corona and the World After.*[18] With growing infections and deaths, the virus is setting the international agenda, confining millions inside their homes, amid wrecked economies, institutions, and livelihood. As the world is passing through its toughest socio-economic crisis, it is safe to assume that the already unpopular

Trump Plan would be quietly buried among the scores of unsuccessful peace initiatives.

India's Reaction

Some of the positives of the Trump Plan are in sync with India's traditional position, but the proposed solution is not. Reminding that New Delhi has been "consistently supportive of the Palestine cause," the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs called for "a two-state solution" achieved "through direct negotiations between the two parties and be acceptable to both." It urged both parties to "engage with each other" to consider the Trump Plan in finding "an acceptable two-State solution for peaceful coexistence."[19] The statement came in response to a media query and was made just weeks before India hosted President Trump.

The Trump Plan did not reflect India's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor does it further India's interests in the Middle East. India could not be enthusiastic about it. At the same time, it is evident to seasoned observers that the Plan has no chance of making even minimal impact on the region, and any negative response from India would only generate unnecessary and avoidable reactions from the Trump Administration.

The Trump Plan makes a clinical assessment of the critical problems of the Middle East and underlines the prolonged statelessness of the Palestinians as the core problem. But the remedy it proposes is not only unrealistic but also insulting to the Palestinians and seeks to legitimise the status quo. It considered, addressed, and accommodated a section of the Israeli right-wing represented by Prime Minister Netanyahu. Hence, it invoked only little support in the Middle East and beyond. Even little hopes were silently buried on March 11, 2020, when after considerable hesitation, the WHO declared the Coronavirus as a global pandemic. The Trump Plan is yet another example of a missed opportunity.

Notes

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